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181416Z Mar 03

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000557

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NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR JENDAYI FRAZER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/18/2013

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SUBJECT: MDC-ORGANIZED STAYAWAY SHUTS DOWN URBAN CENTERS

REF: HARARE 546

Classified By: political section chief Matt Harrington. Reasons: 1.5 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) A majority of businesses in Harare and other Zimbabwean cities complied with the opposition MDC's call for a national stayaway on March 18. It is unclear how many employees stayed at home because they agreed with the stayaway's political objectives and how many were simply unable to find transport. There were unconfirmed reports of trouble in some of Harare's high-density suburbs, including stoning and burning of some commuter omnibuses and erection of road barricades by MDC youths. Police have deployed in force to Harare's high-density suburbs and are determined to quash any protests before they spread. A military helicopter was seen patrolling the skies over Harare. Many businesses have told us they plan to close on March 19 for the second day of the called stayaway, primarily to avoid subjecting their workers to the potentially risky task of finding public transport to and from work. The success of the second day of the announced stayaway -- on March 19 -- will be a key test of the MDC's political heft. The opposition party is pleased with the results of the first day and is contemplating an attempt to organize street protests on March 19, beginning in the capital's high-density areas. End Summary.

Large-scale participation

2. (C) Significant numbers of Zimbabweans in urban centers have complied with the opposition MDC's call for a national stayaway on March 18. In a midday drive around Harare, polchief observed that approximately 50-60 percent of retail outlets and some banks in the central business district were closed, with many of the normally full parking spaces available, and pedestrian and vehicular traffic noticeably lighter than normal. The entire industrial area looked like a ghost town, with virtually every business shut down. Colgate Palmolive, whose experience appeared to be typical of that of most large companies in Harare, was barely able to function, as 75 percent of its work force did not make it to work. A large insurance company reported that only about 20 percent of its workers from high-density suburbs made it to work, but most of those arrived late because of transport problems. Many companies which remained open told us they planned to release their workers by early afternoon, to give them plenty of time to find transport home.

3. (C) In the second-largest city of Bulawayo, approximately half of downtown retail outlets were closed, while most businesses in the industrial area were closed. Those that were open were reportedly operating at about 50 percent capacity. The mayor of the southern city of Masvingo -- Alois Chaimiti -- told us that about 80 percent of downtown shops and some banks were closed there and that virtually no commuter omnibuses were operating. MDC special advisor Gandhi Mudzingwa claimed to us that most businesses in Hwange were closed, although only about 30 percent of companies in the eastern city of Mutare had agreed to close. In the central Zimbabwean city of Gweru, ten percent of workers at Bata Shoes did not show up for work at the company's three plants.

Violence

4. (U) It is impossible to discern how many Zimbabweans stayed away from work because they agreed with the stayaway's political objectives, and how many had simply been unable to find transport. In many of Harare's high-density suburbs, MDC youths successfully prevented commuter omnibuses from transporting people to work. In Hatfield, Glenview, Kuwadzana, Tafara, Epworth, and Mabvuku, roads were reportedly blocked by improvised barricades of rocks and, in some cases, burning tires. Some public and private vehicles

that stopped to pick up passengers were stoned. A private bus operator in Glenview dispatched his buses to the area as usual the morning of March 18 but pulled them back after stoning incidents. We have heard unconfirmed reports of vehicles -- primarily commuter omnibuses -- being burnt in the high- and medium-density suburbs for daring to take people to work, including Mabvuku, Rugare, Epworth, Zengeza, Kambuzuma, and Braeside. It is unclear whether these are all separate incidents or multiple reports of the same event. In Hatfield, a bread delivery truck and a long-distance ZUPCO bus were reportedly torched.

15. (C) Only 28 of USAID's 67 FSN employees made it to work today, while 15 percent of State and CDC FSN's were absent. In Hatcliff, a custodian at CDC was roughed up by six men who demanded to know why he was going to work -- his forearm was injured and he narrowly escaped a head injury from a thrown rock. The Embassy has encouraged FSN's who may have trouble travelling to their homes in high-density areas to leave early.

Government reaction

16. (C) Determined to prevent large numbers of demonstrators from getting into the city center, police established roadblocks on most of the major arteries leading into town. Police presence has been heavy in some high-density suburbs and, on March 18, armored police vehicles have been observed entering some of these areas. Interestingly, there was almost no overt police presence in downtown Harare, suggesting that police are focusing on the current trouble spots in high-density suburbs. MDC advisor Mudzingwa claimed that police forces are stretched very thin at the moment, and that many of them have been deployed since the early morning hours and are exhausted. A military helicopter has been patrolling the skies over Harare, with a gunner visibly in position. We have heard unconfirmed reports of armed forces being deployed to some trouble spots and are trying to verify these.

Comment

17. (C) The MDC has to be pleased with the results of day one of the stayaway, as they have demonstrated the capacity to shut down large sectors of the economy. The real test of the party's political heft, however, will be whether they are able to sustain this effort through at least a second day and perhaps beyond. The evening of March 18, the MDC plans to assess the success of the mass action so far and determine whether to proceed with street protests on March 19, beginning in the high-density suburbs. Police have so far been able to contain incidents of violence but we have no doubt that any attempts to expand violent confrontation will be met with overwhelming force, including deployment of military forces.

18. (C) The day's events have not affected Embassy operations or the low-density residential areas in which our American families live.
SULLIVAN